

Monsters and Missing Children by howdyspacebuddy (eigengrau)

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Summary:

Loss does funny things to a person. Jim Hopper knows that better than most.

A missing scene from Episode 6, "The Monster."

Monsters and Missing Children

Loss does funny things to a person. Jim Hopper knows that better than most. The transition from a clean-cut family man with a pretty blonde wife and a duplex and a dog, a respected big city detective with more than a few commendations under your belt, to the chief of Indiana's rinky-dinkiest police department with a low-key pill problem, a shitty trailer, and a permanent dent in the couch where you've passed out on it one too many times is... dramatic, to say the least. *Everyone handles grief differently*, he remembers his shrink saying in one of the last sessions before he stopped seeing her for good. *The loss of a child is especially difficult, and there's no wrong way to mourn.*

Of course, lost doesn't always mean, you know. Dead.

"I'm not crazy." There's a set to Joyce Byers' jaw, a flinty edge to her big brown eyes. It's the kind of determination, he realizes, that he'd never seen in his wife after Sarah's diagnosis. Hell, he'd never seen it in himself—he recognizes the bags under her eyes, the waxy skin, the way that anxious weight loss turns you gaunt and hollow—but looking in the bathroom mirror he'd never had that hard certainty that's sitting solid under Joyce's panic. He's sort of jealous of her, to be honest.

"I'm not crazy," she repeats, staring at him. Her gaze has the intensity of a tractor beam, though he thinks she's saying it more to herself than to him.

"I know," Jim says. She might be sort of crazy, actually, but who's he to judge when he's got a third of a bottle of Xanax spread out on his coffee table? And anyways, she's not crazy where it counts—not about her son. Not about Will.

Monsters and missing children. Maybe the whole world's gone nuts.

"Can I steal one of your cigarettes?" Joyce asks.

"Sure." He fishes one out of the pack and sticks it between her lips without thinking. She's so close to him in the cramped cab of the

pond scum-green Pinto. They both smell like smoke, and she pulls her Bic lighter from the pocket of her jacket. She flicks it once, twice, and swears when it fails to ignite.

Jim takes it from her, fingers ghosting over hers. He can feel the pad of her thumb, hot and rough from the friction. "Let me—" he says. His hands are much bigger than hers, and it doesn't take much force to spark a flame. Joyce leans in and takes a long pull on the cigarette, the both of them watching the tip take the fire and start to burn.

She blows out the smoke aimlessly and shakes her head. "Thanks," she mutters, voice soft and shaky.

"Yeah, no problem." They should be getting on the road. Who knows how long the drive to Terry Ives' place will be, and they don't have much time. Jim reaches to turn the key in the ignition, but Joyce's hand lands on his knee and stops him. He looks up, at her eyes only a couple of inches away, blue smoke curling thinly around her face.

"Thank you, Hopper," she says, more emphatically.

Jim nods. Her palm is warm through his jeans. It's... distracting. He thinks about the night he'd been called to the Byers' house on a domestic disturbance call, just a summer ago, and had pulled into the driveway with his lights flashing to find Joyce sitting on her porch, knees hugged to her chest in a tank top and shorts. She had jerked her chin to the wood-handled hatchet dropped next to her, and then to the second car in the driveway, its windows all smashed in. The broken glass had been glittering in the headlights from the police car. *He's been seeing some teenager*, she had glared, and he'd seen the resignation under the anger, *so I figured if he can trade in one thing for next years' model, he can trade in another*. Fucking Lonnie. The divorce had gone through two months later.

Ash is building up on the end of her cigarette, and she stubs it out. Jim's still half-reaching for the keys.

Joyce's eyes are huge and rimmed red from three days of tears and panic, and her hand is hot on his knee, and he surges forward and kisses her before his left brain can tell him to think better of it.

Her other hand flies up to wrap around the back of his neck, anchoring herself as their lips press together. It's surprisingly chaste—dry and yielding, but forceful. She holds him there. When they do break apart, he keeps his eyes closed, breathing hard.

"Hopper," she says, and he feels her fingers skim across his cheek, his jaw, rasping against his beard. "Jim."

He blinks. She's staring at him. "Sorry," he mumbles, like an idiot.

Joyce shakes her head. "C'mere," she mutters, and pulls him back in.

There is absolutely not enough space in the Pinto for this. He has to duck down to reach Joyce, or she has to move up, somehow, both of them meeting awkwardly over the handbrake. She reaches over him and fumbles against the driver's side door until she finds the lever to push his seat back and down. When she throws her leg over, sliding out of shotgun and onto his lap, he thinks he's going to have a goddamn heart attack. It'd serve him right. In fact, he thinks, there's a distinct possibility that he's already dead, and that this whole thing—the missing kids, monsters in the walls, secret government conspiracies and talking Christmas lights—is some sort of dying hallucination.

But Joyce feels awfully real against him, shrugging out of her leather jacket and taking his face in her hands. His hat's been knocked right off, vanishing somewhere into the backseat, and his big hands bracket Joyce's waist. She seems to fit perfectly, big-and-small, short-and-tall, the two of them coming together with a weird synchronization. She's a full foot shorter than him, he knows. The thought makes him bite down on a groan.

He's thought about her for a long time, since long before that night on the porch, angry and sad with her pale skin goosebumped in the summer chill. He hasn't known a whole lot of women like Joyce Byers. He abandons her lips and mouths along her jaw, pressing kisses into the hollow under her ear, to her long pale neck. She shudders and sighs, grinding down against his lap, and he's getting hard beneath her and it feels *so good*. He wraps his arms around her and pulls her close, to his chest, breathing in the smell of Camels and hours-faded funeral perfume. They kiss again, open-mouthed,

desperate. One of his hands slides up and under her shirt, along the smooth skin of her side, and she reaches back to brace herself against the dashboard and—

—accidentally slams her palm down on the car's horn.

They both jump at the noise, Joyce's head bumping against the roof of the Pinto. She lets out a sharp yelp and Jim's hand goes reflexively to the sore spot, like he can somehow stop it from hurting by covering her hair. Stupid. "Sorry, sorry..." he apologizes again, watching her wince, "are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she says, settling back. Both of them are breathing hard, hair mussed, and the car's windows have started to fog. Cold November daylight still streams in, and like that, the moment is broken, glittering on the ground like the smashed glass from Lonnie's Camaro.

Joyce touches the tips of her fingers to her lips, kiss-dark and swollen. She flushes as Jim clears his throat. "We should probably get going," he says, strained.

"Right." She nods and clambers off his lap, awkwardly slipping back into the passenger's seat. Jim pushes his own seat back into place with a cough, adjusting his jeans when Joyce looks away for a second.

Everyone reacts to loss differently, says a voice in the back of his head that sounds suspiciously like his old therapist. Jim turns the keys, firing up the engine and pointedly not watching Joyce tug down her shirt and shrug back into her jacket as they pull out of the driveway.

"Hopper—" she blurts out, a few minutes down the road, but he shakes his head.

"Don't worry about it," he says, and he can see her shoulders relax out of the corner of his eye. "It's... it happens."

"Okay."

They can always talk about it later, if they really have to. But that's not the priority right now. They drive off, heading into the unknown,

with nothing but two heads full of questions and firm but possibly misguided hope.

Maybe that'll be enough to find Will.